

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN HUMPBACKS SINCE 1963

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Aerial surveys off Shark Bay, Western Australia, since 1976 have demonstrated a significant increase in Southern Hemisphere "Group IV" Humpback Whales since whaling ceased off Western Australia in 1963. "Group IV" animals are humpbacks which summer in Antarctic Area IV (70°E–130°E) and winter north of that area, off Western Australia.

Flights have been timed for comparison with data available from whaling company spotter aircraft operations in 1963. Since 1977 they have been undertaken over a ten day period in mid-July, when most sighted whales are still travelling northwards. Results demonstrate that the number had at least doubled between 1963 and 1982. The best estimate of the increase rate is 8.8% per annum. It is possible that recovery may have been somewhat delayed. To detect any further increase, it is planned to repeat the surveys, using the standardised techniques already adopted, for the same period and at the same time of the year, in 1991 and 1994.

Given an estimate of some 500 animals remaining at the end of 1963, of which at least half would have been immature, and allowing for a possible delay in recovery, the present number off Western Australia in winter/spring seems to be around 2,000–3,000. That result is broadly consistent with the sighting rate of 17 per day, mostly moving north, in the Shark Bay aerial survey in 1988 and an encounter rate of 1.5 per hour, mostly moving south, in field operations for photographic identification off the Dampier Archipelago in 1990.

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